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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON SIX NORTH KOREANS

Classified By: SUSAN SUTTON, POLITICAL COUNSELOR, REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary. In an April 20 meeting, ROK Embassy officials expressed familiar concerns about U.S. resettlement of North Korean refugees but indicated that they would be prepared to help in accordance with commitments the ROKG has made to the United States. In a subsequent UNHCR-ROK Embassy meeting, there was agreement that interviews of the North Koreans would be conducted at the UNHCR office. UNHCR requested ROK assistance in nationality verification and resettlement interest, but the ROK Embassy said it needed to seek approval from Seoul. UNHCR told Refcoord that after nationality verification is complete, UNHCR would issue its normal protection letter for North Korean refugees and then have the North Koreans sign a form stating their resettlement country preference. End summary.

ROK Response on Six North Koreans

12. (C) Embassy Political Counselor and refugee officers met with the new ROK Political Counselor and other officers on April 20 to discuss the six North Koreans who have approached the Embassy about resettlement to the United States. Embassy Political Counselor opened by noting the high level of USG and Congressional interest in the six and the importance of working together quickly on their cases. Political Counselor noted that the USG expected the ROK would provide assistance in determining nationality and performing background checks. The U.S. understood the sensitivity and complicated nature of the North Korean refugee issue and stated that the U.S. would work discreetly and in a manner that we hoped would not disrupt the existing pipeline that moves North Koreans to the ROK. Political Counselor noted that we had been in contact with UNHCR and understood that UNHCR wanted to meet with the ROK Embassy as soon as possible to request ROK assistance with the group of six.

13. (C) ROK Embassy officers responded by noting that they had received instructions from Seoul and that the ROK hoped the USG would assume a major role and responsibility in handling the cases of the six North Koreans. The ROKG cared very much about the existing pipeline and cooperation with UNHCR which worked quietly and efficiently. U.S. resettlement of North Koreans could create a pull factor that might endanger the current system. This greatly worried the ROKG.

14. (C) ROK Embassy officers state that the number of North Koreans coming to Thailand had increased substantially this year. It was unclear whether this was due to NGO activists anticipating the start of U.S. resettlement or a tougher Chinese policy that was making it harder for North Koreans to resettle to the ROK through China. It was also possible that other North Koreans already in Thailand and headed for the ROK might change their minds if they learned of a U.S. option. It was essential to avoid any publicity that might put the existing system in danger. An ROK officer noted the case several years ago when a group of North Koreans had climbed over the wall of the the Japanese Embassy and sought resettlement to Japan. The North Korean government had complained to the Thai government about that development. It would be very hard to keep resettlement of North Korean refugees to the United States quiet. The ROKG was very concerned about its relations with the DPRK and third countries such as Thailand.

15. (C) The ROK side continued that it understood the United States may need some help with the six North Koreans and it was prepared to help. At the same time, it was important for the United States to have UNHCR engaged on the issue. Once UNHCR asked for help, the response would be favorable. However, an ROK Embassy officer, not the ROKG official seconded to UNHCR, would provide the assistance. It would be best to conduct the interviews of the six North Koreans at UNHCR. The ROK Embassy officer would help in verifying nationality but the United States should understand that there could not be complete certainty in a determination by the ROK Embassy officer that the six were in fact North Koreans and not, for example, Chinese. The ROK Embassy officer would provide his best judgement, but the ROKG could not take responsibility or provide an assurance that its

determination would be correct.

16. (C) In addition, the ROK side stated that it would be prepared to provide any interpretation assistance that UNHCR might require. Regarding background checks, the ROK Embassy officials stated they they would do their best to help but did not provide a time frame for when the background checks would be completed.

Outcome of UNHCR - ROK Embassy Meeting

17. (C) UNHCR officials subsequently met with ROK Embassy officials on April 20 to discuss the six North Koreans. UNHCR acting chief Giuseppe de Vincentis informed Refcoord that there was agreement that interviews of the North Koreans would occur at the UNHCR office. De Vincentis said that, following instructions from Geneva, he told the ROK officials that UNHCR was seeking concurrence in using the South Korean secondee since that was existing practice but that any other official that the ROKG might deem appropriate in verifying nationality and resettlement country preference would be acceptable.

18. (C) According to de Vincentis, the ROK officials responded by stating that they needed to seek guidance from Seoul on whomever was used and asked whether UNHCR had a preference. De Vincentis said he responded that since UNHCR thought existing practice should be followed, the preference was for the secondee. De Vincentis said he pressed for approval in time to permit interviews on April 21. The ROK officials did not make a commitment on when Seoul approval would be forthcoming. Subsequently, UNHCR called the ROK Embassy at cob and was told that no approval had been received. De Vincentis asked Refcoord whether the USG had any preference on the question of which ROK official would do the interviews. Refcoord responded that we had no preference.

19. (C) De Vincentis said that he foresaw that after the nationality verification is completed, the standard UNHCR person of concern letter for North Koreans would be produced and given to the North Koreans. Then UNHCR would follow normal practice and ask the North Koreans to fill out and sign a form which asks them for their resettlement country preference. (Comment. This last form is for internal UNHCR purposes. The Bangkok OPE would subsequently have the North Koreans sign the USG form regarding the U.S. refugee program that confirms interest in U.S. resettlement).
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